OLGA KAWECKA

THE GLIMPSED ETERNITY

The Old Polish Cemetery in Grodno

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the Old Polish Cemetery in Grodno

Tver
2015

The book is a collection of artistic photographs taken by the author at the old Polish cemetery in Grodno, Belarus.

Olga Kawecka (b. 1987): poet, writer, translator, and historian.

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To my lost homeland

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Preface

Names remain like prayers
written on the dust of the world

Wandering at a cemetery is the same as reading a book. Generations lived, rejoicing and suffering, and vanished, but there remain graves – there remain names. Reading them attentively and with care on old slabs, one revives them, and they respond – respond by strange deep awe reverberating in one's heart like in a temple. They are remembered – one is alive: there is no death.

I visited the old Catholic cemetery in Grodno for the first time in 2013. I hoped to find the graves of my ancestors who had lived there until 1920. Every day of my two-weeks stay, I roamed at the cemetery, among forgotten graves with proud monuments and black gaps, and sought the familiar names. I found only one person. He was a young man of twenty-seven, who had died in 1901 (to all appearances, of consumption). Others rested elsewhere. But were all those persons not my close ones? Were those forgotten souls not kindred to me? The cemetery became "mine." I spent my evenings there, reading the Latin Bible and listening (by phones) to classical music. One

of my favourite compositions was *De profundis* by Ch. W. Gluck.

Out of depth I called...

Out of depth they called, being forgotten. Out of depth I called, being lonely. We were united in eternal Beauty.

Beauty: that place is wonderfully beautiful. Almost every monument has its peculiar charm, every nook is full of fascination: it is not a cemetery, but a true museum created by loving persons and Time.

That cemetery is perishable, too: its marvellous old stones will fall, and its graves will collapse, and humans will forget it completely, but its beauty – its over-worldly essence – is eternal. All the good, beautiful things belong to Eternity.

Author
October 9, 2014

About the cemetery

The cemetery was founded in 1792, by a Catholic priest Józef Muczyński (d. February 4, 1793). In 1822 a Gothic chapel was erected there (its belfry was finished in 1907).

The cemetery is situated upon a hill on the bank of the river Neman. On three sides it is surrounded by quiet city streets.

The peculiarity of the cemetery is the burying in crypts. A crypt is usually about three metres long, two and a half metres wide, and three metres deep. Its ceiling is vaulted. The walls and the vault are made of red brick. Deceased persons rest in plain stone sarcophagi. Monuments stand above the wall, not above the vault of a crypt. Some graves are covered with a heavy slab.

Epitaphs are often detailed: one may learn not only the name and the lifespan of the dead but his/her occupation and the cause of his/her death. About one fourth of the persons, who were buried in the 19th century, had died at the age from twenty to thirty years that makes one suppose consumption to be one of the prevalent causes of departure.

The buried persons were priests (they rest near the chapel), doctors, soldiers, officials, students, schoolboys... Almost all belonged to the gentry.

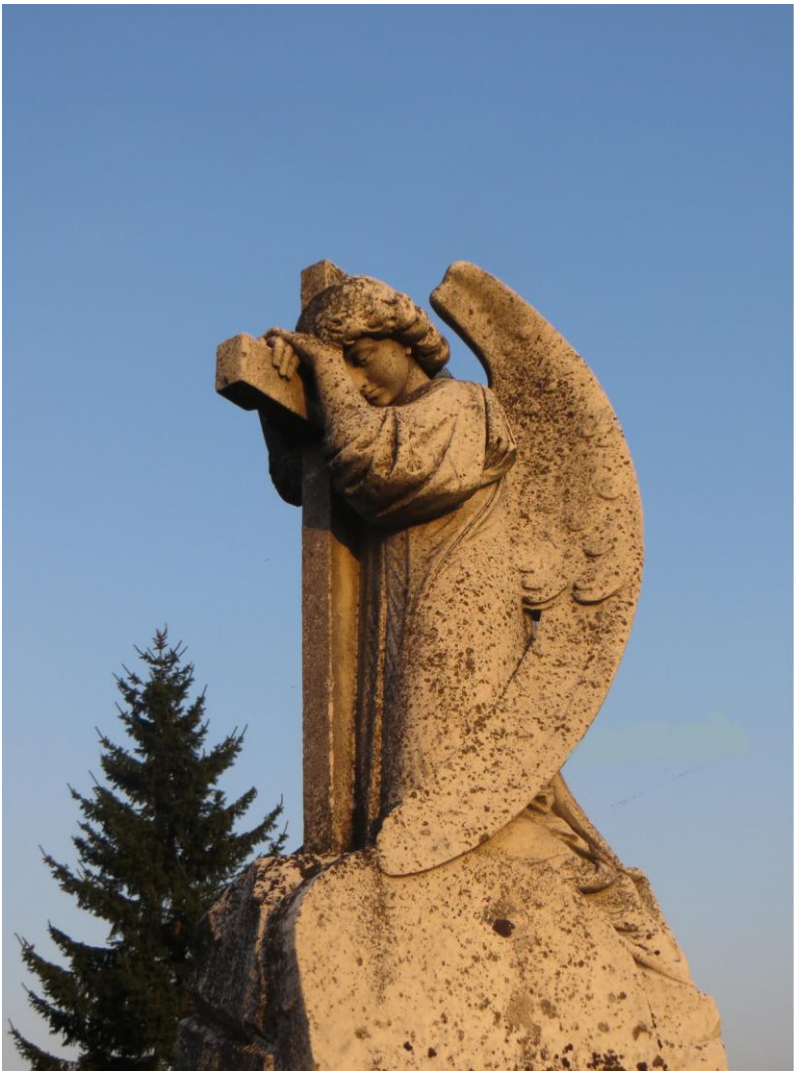
At the cemetery there are few graves of the

Germans and the French.

In 1919 the even austere rows of white stone crosses rose there, above the graves of the Poles fallen during an independance war against the Russians.

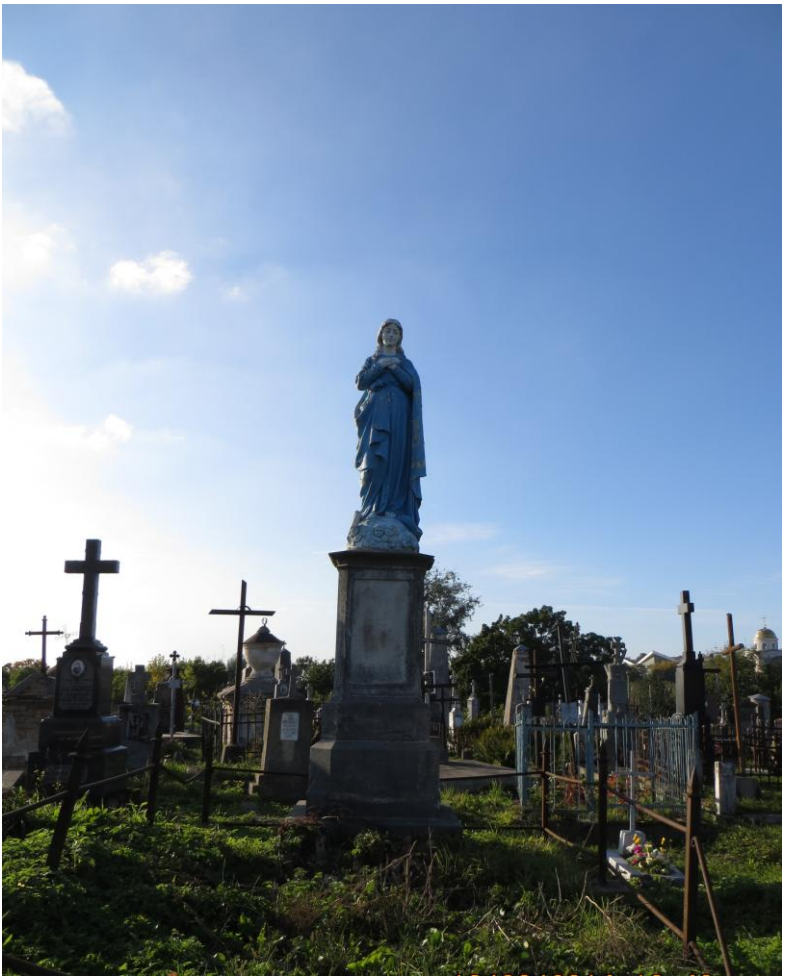
In 1939 burying was officially finished there, though singular entombings continued until the 1970s.

PHOTOGRAPHS



A mourning angel above a grave, 1909

A tower-shaped monument built in the 1830s



The triumph of the Cross
(a grave dated 1883)

The graves of the fallen during an independence war, 1919

1859

S. P.
TEKLA
z
GOLEBIOWSKA
1859

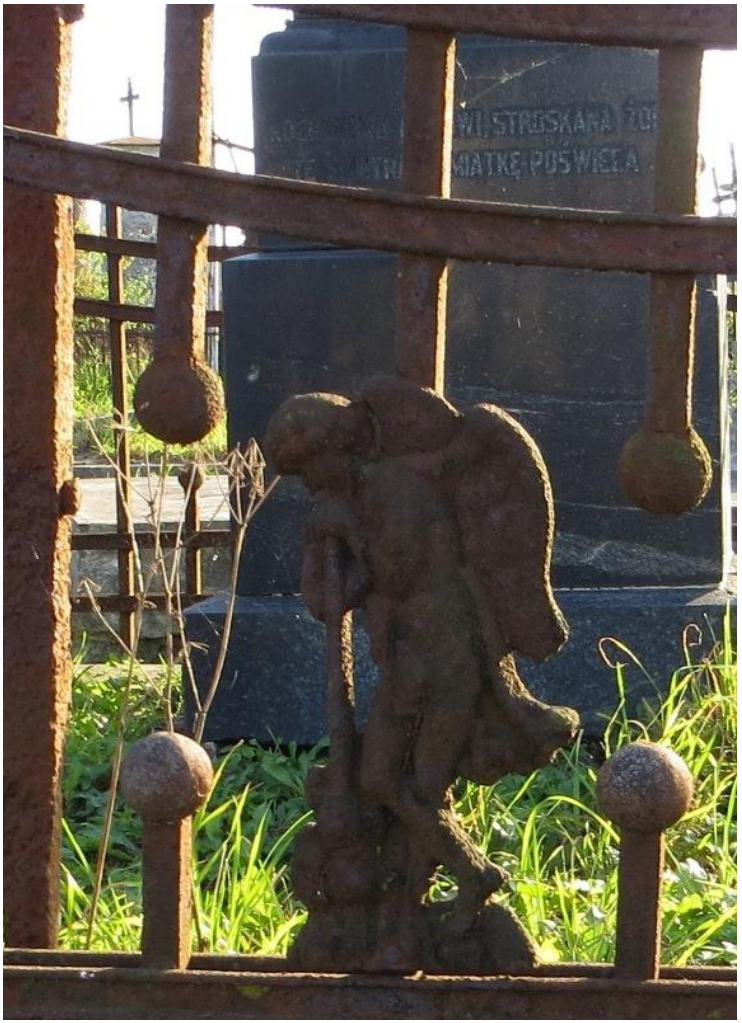
The grave of a two-year-old girl, 1855

1874

A metal monument, 1859

MARIA
JANKOWSKA

The “towers” and the “house” were built in the 1830s



1937

A metal cross

1872

1889

1889

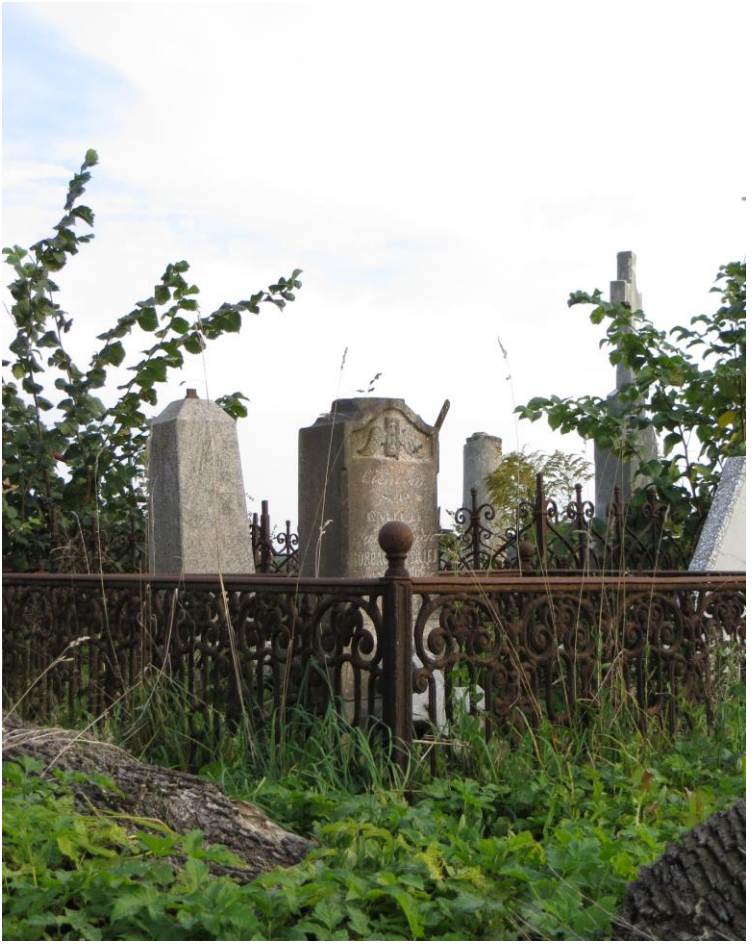
1844

1848

The same monument

The 1840s

1916



1833

The 1840s or the 1850s

The grave of a young man aged twenty-three, 1907

A fragment of a fence around a grave

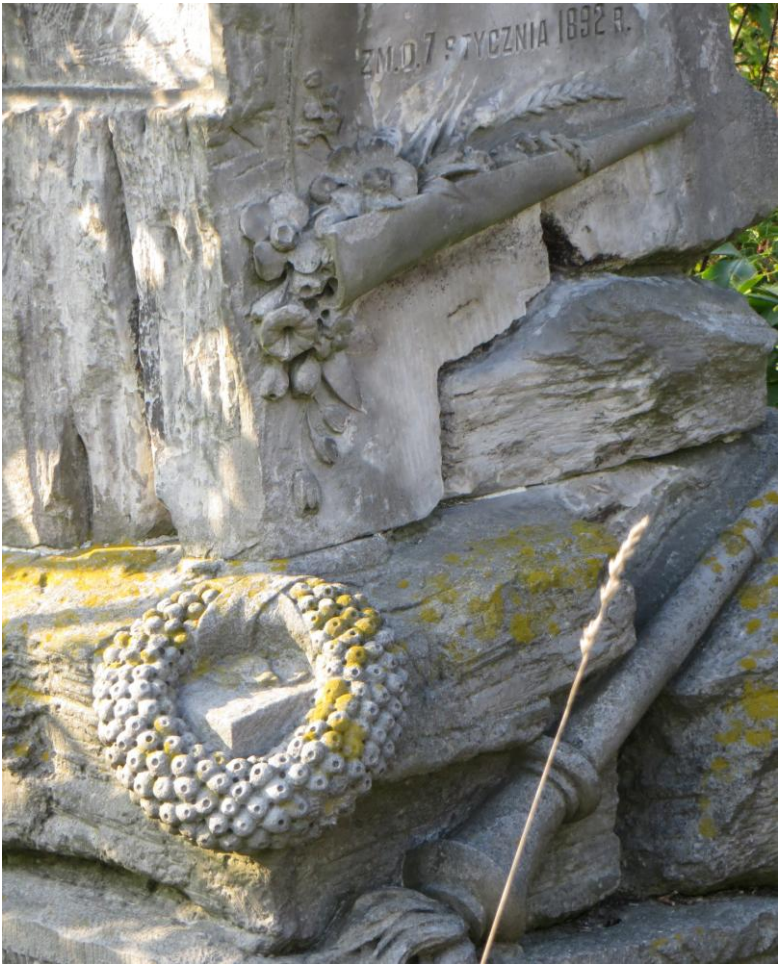
A fragment of a monument built in the 1830s

The same monument

And again, that monument

The 1830s

In the background there is a collapsed grave



1892

1909

The burial place of two youths, aged 16 and 20, and their mother. The 1870s

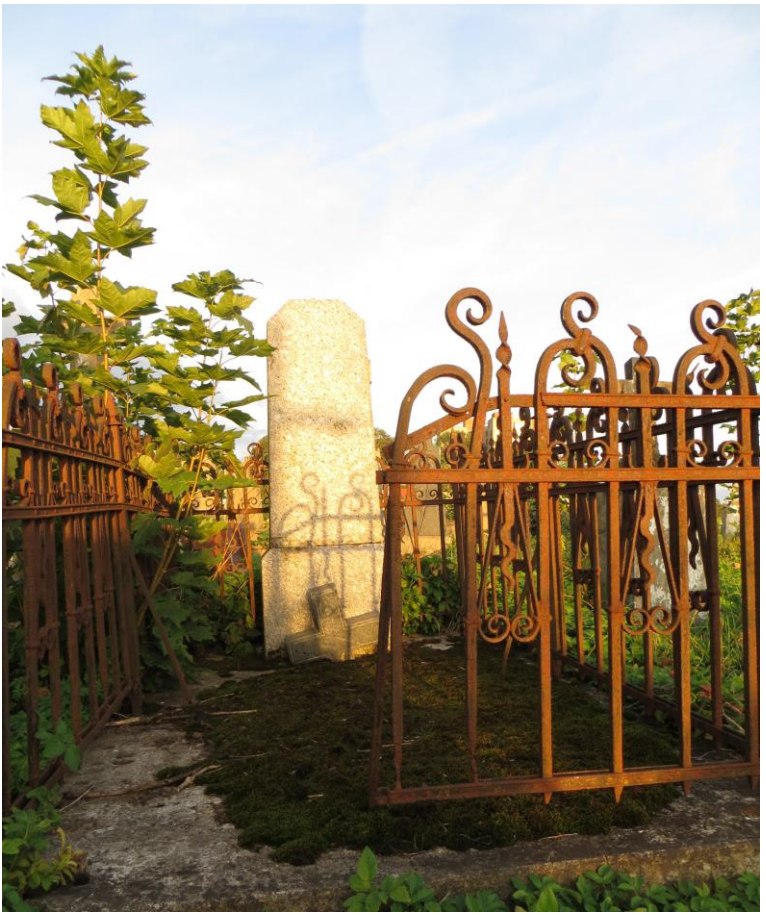
1931

1931

The epitaph to a thirteen-year-old boy killed during the defence of Grodno in 1939.

The wall of the chapel

The 1870s or the 1880s



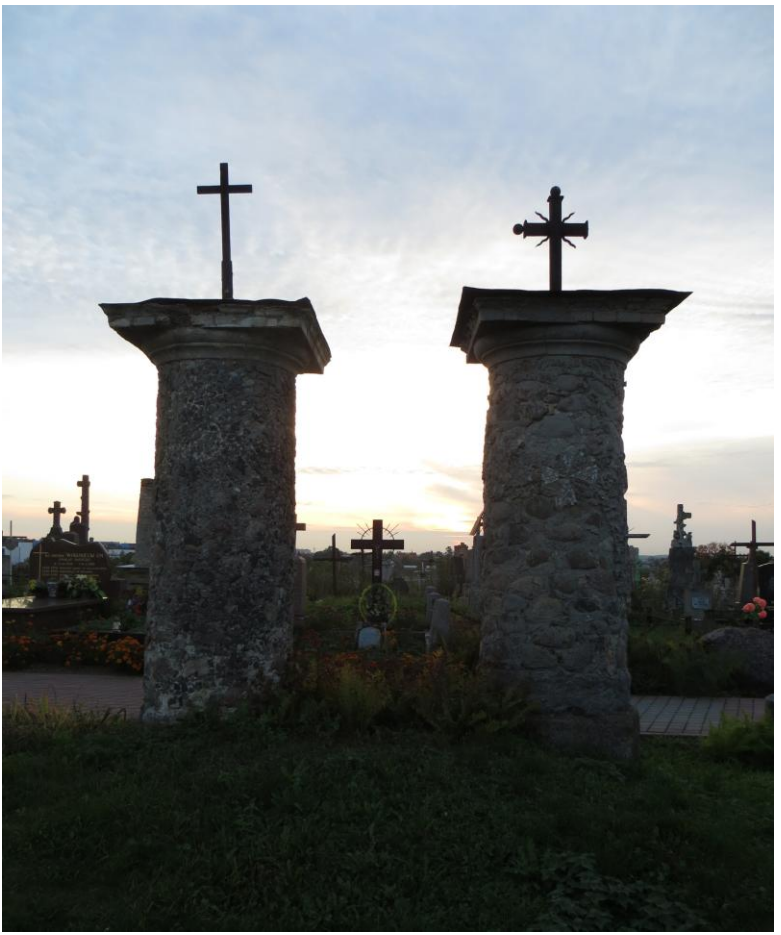
1889

1885

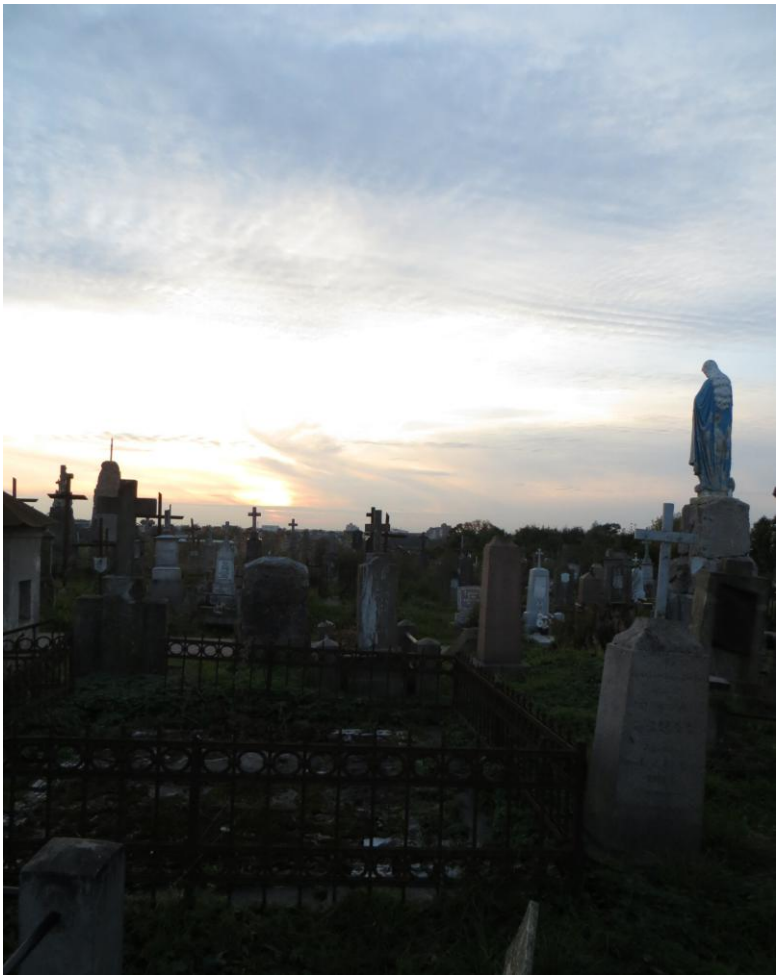
The grave of a general, 1910

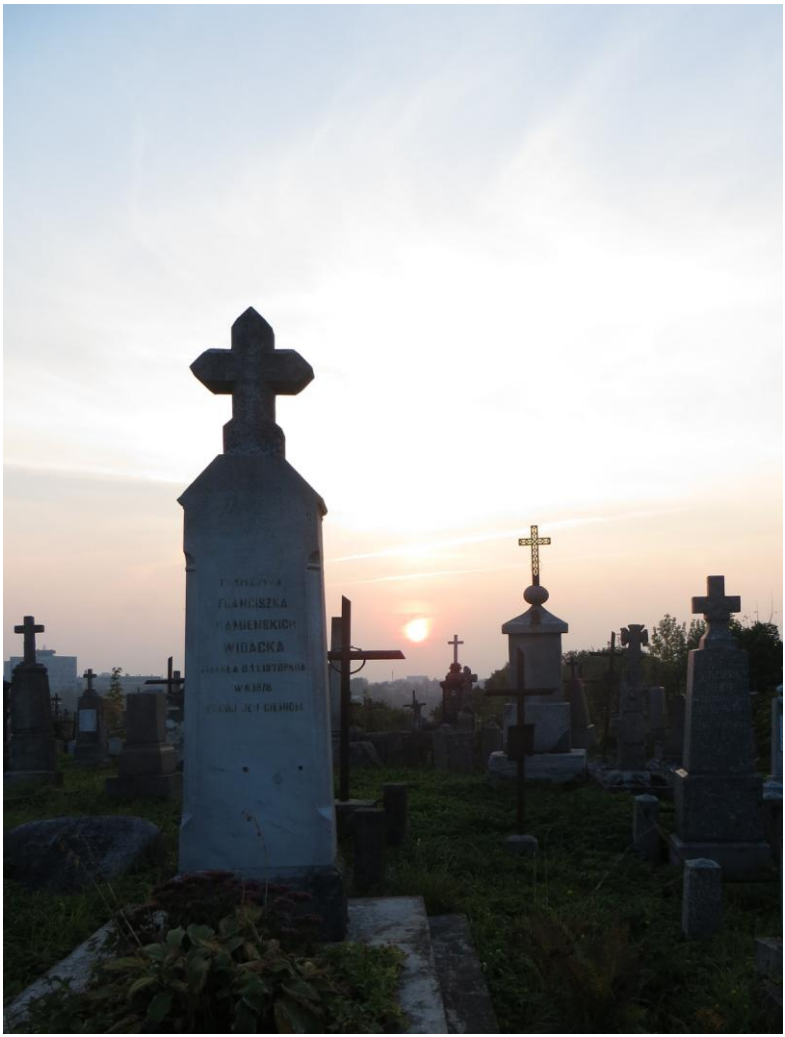
1888

The grave of a doctor, 1875

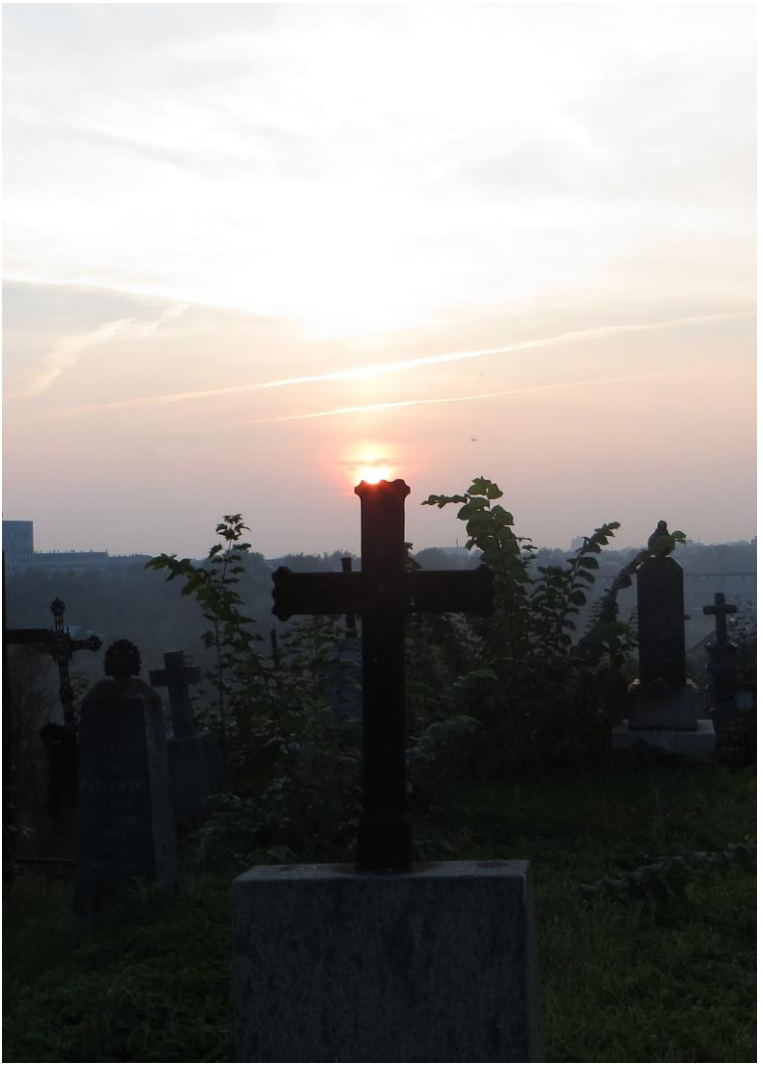


The 1830s

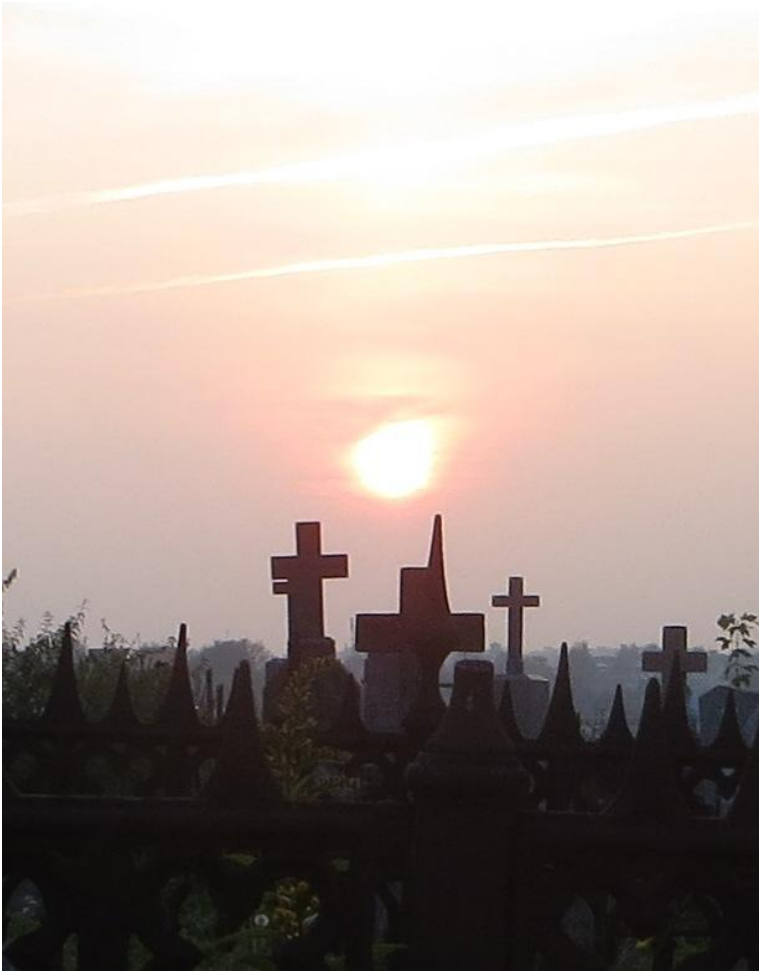




1878



1848



Epilogue

The sun is drooping solemnly in the glowing west, light clouds – like faint reminiscences – plume overhead, and a poignant melody of the clocks is accompanying me as I am walking slowly towards the gate.

No one remains at the cemetery. The deceased will be alone again as well as I shall be lonely there, beyond the protecting fence. I turn around. Grey monuments rise against a background of the sky – against a background of the pale blue, the purest white, the triumphant purple, and the lightest gold. They are a part of that exultant symphony of colours – they are a part of Eternity. There is no loneliness there.

The cover: the monument built in 1848. The photograph taken by the author, 2014.

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